



The Frontline Supervisor

*Helping You Manage Your Company's
Most Valuable Resource - Employees*

July 2001

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- ◆ My employee has visited the EAP three times this month during work hours. Frankly, I need him on the job, but I haven't said anything about appointments interfering with work. How do EAPs keep appointments from interfering with an employee's work duties?

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- ◆ If I consult with the EAP, is it a good idea to tell the employee that the EA professional agrees with me concerning the need for a supervisor referral? This might help my employee see that I am not the only one who thinks she should call the EAP.

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- ◆ I asked my employee to perform a simple task, and he retorted, "Well, if I get around to it!" I am a new supervisor to this company, and I was surprised by this inappropriate response. What causes such an attitude?

Check your organization's EAP policy or ask your EA professional for guidance on use of the EAP during work hours. Historically, organizations have encouraged the use of the EAP for supervisor referrals during work hours without charging leave, particularly for the employee's first appointment. For subsequent appointments, or if self-referred employees use the EAP during work hours, they may be required to use leave. Some policies purposely avoid restrictive language that may reduce EAP use, or they permit supervisors to use discretion whether or not a self-referral employee (who chooses to inform the supervisor) must use leave to visit the EAP. Of course, most employees use the EAP outside work hours or at other times, thus eliminating the need to explain their absence from work. Employees are always responsible for satisfactory performance of their duties. It may therefore be appropriate to ask whether EAP visits can be kept outside work hours depending on what is customary for your organization.

Attempting to influence your employee's decision to accept a referral by repeating what you heard the EA professional say may cause problems and it could create a damaging perception of your EAP as a program aligned with management's purposes. You can bet that your employee would communicate this false perception to others in the organization if she felt disinclined to accept the supervisor referral. Your strong desire to have your employee accept a supervisor referral should not lead you to take measures that would undermine the usefulness of the EAP in the future – either to you or to other employees who might self-refer. It is important not to tamper with a key principle in the use of EAPs: Supervisor referrals are made on the basis of job performance problems (attendance, conduct, and quality of work), and it is the employee's decision whether to accept the referral. This supports the EAP as a program of attraction rather than an instrument of coercion.

Although there may be many explanations for this response from your employee, the common element in this kind of attitude is the employee's belief that no undesirable consequences will result from this conduct. A better question is, "What does management do or not do, if anything, that helps fuel such an attitude?" Regardless of the true cause of any particular attitude problem, this question is the start of helping your employee respond more appropriately. Frequently, managers who tolerate attitude problems complain that a lack of support from above leaves them helpless to address problems with employees. More frequently, however, supervisors take steps that are inconsistent with what is effective or can be supported. Regardless, a team approach with the next level of management is usually essential to address employees with long-term attitude problems.

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- ◆ As director, I take charge of corrective interviews and relay the immediate supervisors' performance complaints to their employees. Too frequently, denial and arguments ensue, leading to only brief improvements. Why is this approach ineffective?

Your approach to correcting employees creates a “triangle” between you, the employee with the performance problem, and the immediate supervisor. With verbal complaints relayed to your employee second-hand, the employee may deny the complaint or dismiss it as a false perception by an unfair supervisor. Rather than conduct the corrective interview yourself, expect the supervisor to do it. Such meetings should be documented, along with the measurable performance problems. Improvement plans should be developed that can be subsequently discussed. This approach effectively uses the supervision process. Your current approach leads the employee who has performance problems to consider changes to be optional because there is no meeting that features effective, factual documentation. At best, you are left pleading with your employee to consider the complaint. Short-term improvements are the result.

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- ◆ Periodically, employees take leave for extended periods of time to help family members with medical problems. We have not referred such employees to the EAP, but should we consider doing so?

Taking leave solely to assist family members with health problems would not justify a supervisor referral, but reminding employees about the EAP as a supportive resource would be a good idea. Be careful to tell your employee that the recommendation is only meant to be helpful – employees who take time off for extended periods are often anxious about how they are perceived by others at work. Many health care problems are so demanding of the patient and family members that certain resources may be necessary to manage employee stress and the patient's health care delivery needs. Typically EAPs find resources, many unique, that assist employees in their caregiver responsibilities. Some of these services would not be easily discovered without assistance from the EAP.

Notes:

This information is intended only for the employees of your company. Please do not post it on a website that is accessible by the general public or by your company's clients.

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